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Soviet failure to cut U.N. mission prompted U.S. drive against spies

By Bill Gertz
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The Soviets' failure to take action to reduce the number of diplomats at their United Nations mission was a key factor in speeding up the Reagan administration's five-year program to curtail Soviet spying in the United States, according to U.S. officials.

Soviet foot-dragging prompted the Sept. 17 expulsion of 25 top Soviet spies and an additional 55 embassy and consular spies last week in what one U.S. official called the "decapitation" of the Soviets' espionage network in the United States.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Administration officials said the expulsions targeted station chiefs of the KGB and military GRU intelligence services, called "residents," as well as senior KGB officials in charge of "lines" — or sections — responsible for high-tech espionage, media manipulation, and espionage against U.S. intelligence and security agencies.

Among those expelled were:

- KGB and GRU residents in Washington and New York.
- THe GRU resident at the Soviet consulate in San Francisco.
- Four KGB deputy residents, two in administration and two in operations, in New York and Washington.
- KGB "Line X" chiefs and deputy chiefs in New York, Washington and San Francisco. Line X officers are in charge of technological and scientific espionage.
- KGB "Line KR" chiefs in Washington and New York. KR officers handle Soviet efforts to penetrate U.S. intelligence agencies. One intelligence officer who ran the "subline" known as "SK" — security at Soviet diplomatic missions — was also expelled.
- "Sigint" (signals intelligence) specialists responsible for electronic eavesdropping operations in the United States.
- Top officers of the KGB's "Line PR," responsible for "active measures and disinformation" operations, and case officers who control "agents of influence" in government and the media.
- Code clerks responsible for handling communications with Moscow.

Until Soviet U.N. Ambassador Alexander M. Belonogov made "provocative" remarks about the U.S. diplomatic reduction order in a Sept. 13 speech, U.S. security officials had been stymied by what one official delicately referred to as "competing bureacratic interests."

State Department officials feared that a get-tough approach to spying would damage relations with the Soviets, while U.S. security and intelligence officials were intent on carrying out President Reagan's 1981 executive order aimed at disrupting the Soviets' U.S. spy operations.

"It was when their ambassador stated that 'We have no plans to do it,' that 'We're not going to do it, even though we've had five months to plan for it,' that precipitated our response: 'If you won't, then we'll name them,' " one official said.

"The Soviets pulled the trigger on this one," a senior official said. "In that sense, the Soviets may have been helpful to us by accelerating our own [counterspy] program."

The Soviets are said to have some 300 full-time intelligence officers in New York, Washington and San Francisco.

The senior official said Soviet spy operations in New York were a primary target since "the New York espionage operation was the most dangerous one."

The Soviets were first told last November they had to reduce the number of staffers at their U.N. mission, estimated at 275. In March, the Soviets were ordered to eliminate 105 positions by April 1988.

The March order gave the Soviets the option of choosing which 105 diplomats would be recalled starting Oct. 1, in what one official called a "diplomatic gesture."

Instead of ordering out 105 diplomats all at once, one official said, "There was a conscious effort not to send any untoward political message, over and above the political message we were sending, which is that we are getting serious about the imbalance and about the threat."

Last July, U.S. officials told the Soviets that specific diplomatic billets — those held by intelligence officers — had to be eliminated, another official said.

The official said none of the Soviets' bona fide diplomats had been expelled.

"Their MFA [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] officers did not get burned," the official said. "It was a conscious attempt to say diplomatic relations between the United States and the Soviet Union are important."

The official said that since 1947 the U.S. government had been willing to accept a large Soviet intelligence corps, "but that clearly has ended."

"What we're talking about is the Ronald Reagan policy that he has stated over and over: We're not going to allow this," the official said. "That's what I mean by end of era."

Despite the large number of important Soviet spies that were kicked out, "There are still a substantial number of intelligence officers here," one official said. "We haven't wiped them out."

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